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"Flow" & Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

Pronounced "Chicks send me high" according to the Professor!

This item is based on a public lecture presented by Professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in Sydney on 17 March 1999, organized by the School of Leisure & Tourism Studies at the University of Technology Sydney. I have heard of Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow in other writings but have not as yet read any of his own works. It is certainly possible that the following does not adequately reflect his views!

Csikszentmihalyi opened the lecture with an account of his name which included reference to its Hungarian/Transylvanian roots. Talking of his roots he noted one of his defining moments was at the age of ten, in 1945, when Hungarian society was overturned and most of the adults whom he had respected "disintegrated" with the loss of social status and financial support. Though he acknowledges that he hasn't yet discovered the basis for why a few did not "disintegrate", he set himself a goal of discovering a way to live a better life.

He has looked at many different answers to this question in domains as separate as art, religion, and sport, and in the past as well as the present, and sees that there are many different forms of answer. Indeed he noted there seems to be a need to reinvent or reexpress the answer every couple of generations. He saw the need to find or refind the answer as urgent as people do not seem to know what to do to live happy lives.

"How to live life as a work of art, rather than as a chaotic response to external events..."

He started with artists, or with those that were "creating meaning". Many described an "ecstatic state" or a feeling of being outside of what they were creating with their hands. Ecstatic comes from the Latin for "stand to side". Csikszentmihalyi accounted for this feeling of being consciously outside of the creation as due to the psychological limits of consciousness, that at higher levels of consciousness the more mundane aspects become subconscious in order to restrict conscious attention to the number of items it can manage. So a pianist described not noticing the room, his hands, the keys, the score, but rather being conscious of only "being one with the music and expressing emotion".

He noted that a major constraint on people enjoying what they are doing is always being conscious of a fear of how they appear to others and what these others might think. Ecstasy includes rising above these constraining concerns of the ego.

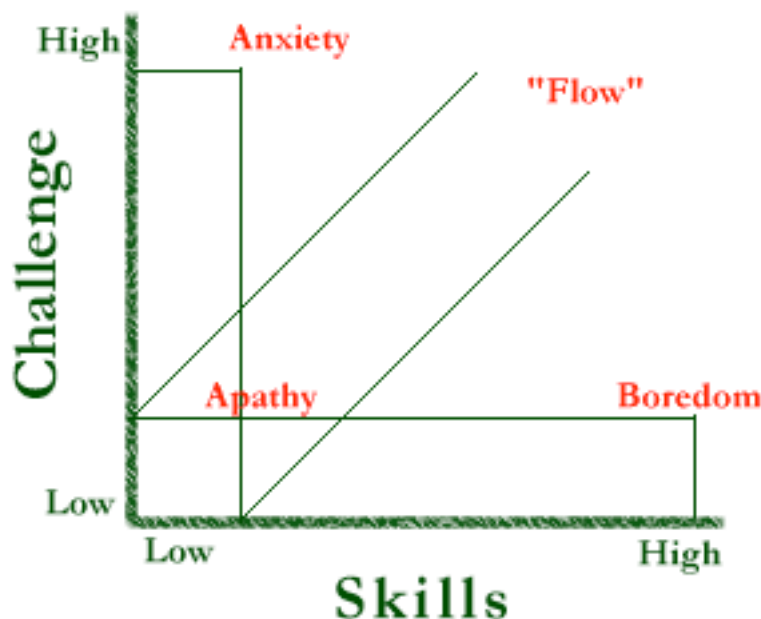
Csikszentmihalyi concluded that stepping outside of normal daily routines is an essential element of what he was looking for. This might be obtained through diverse routes or activities, such as reading a novel or becoming involved in a film.

Csikszentmihalyi has based most of his research on empirical data based on surveying people spontaneously about what the activities they were undertaking and the way they were feeling (along several dimensions) at the time. He used a watch which beeped at random times during each day and required his subjects to immediately complete a standard survey. For many subjects he followed them for one week a year for several years. The research has been undertaken and confirmed in several countries, and now reaches 250,000 surveys.

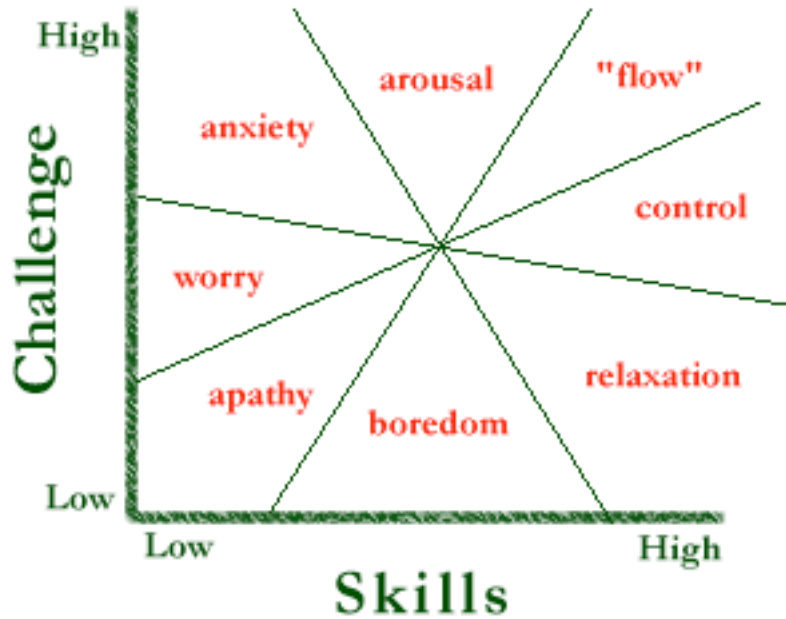
In simple terms the research showed that people were generally unhappy "doing nothing", were generally happy doing things, and generally knew very little about what made them happy.

How does it feel to be in "the flow"?

1. Completely involved, focused, concentrating - with this either due to innate curiosity or as the result of training
2. Sense of ecstasy - of being outside everyday reality
3. Great inner clarity - knowing what needs to be done and how well it is going
4. Knowing the activity is doable - that the skills are adequate, and neither anxious or bored
5. Sense of serenity - no worries about self, feeling of growing beyond the boundaries of ego - afterwards feeling of transcending ego in ways not thought possible
6. Timeliness - thoroughly focused on present, don't notice time passing
7. Intrinsic motivation - whatever produces "flow" becomes its own reward



Csikszentmihalyi saw optimal activities in the "flow" channel moving outward as skills are gained, and certainly before apathy sets in – clearly this parallels Vygotsky's theory of proximal development in learning situations.

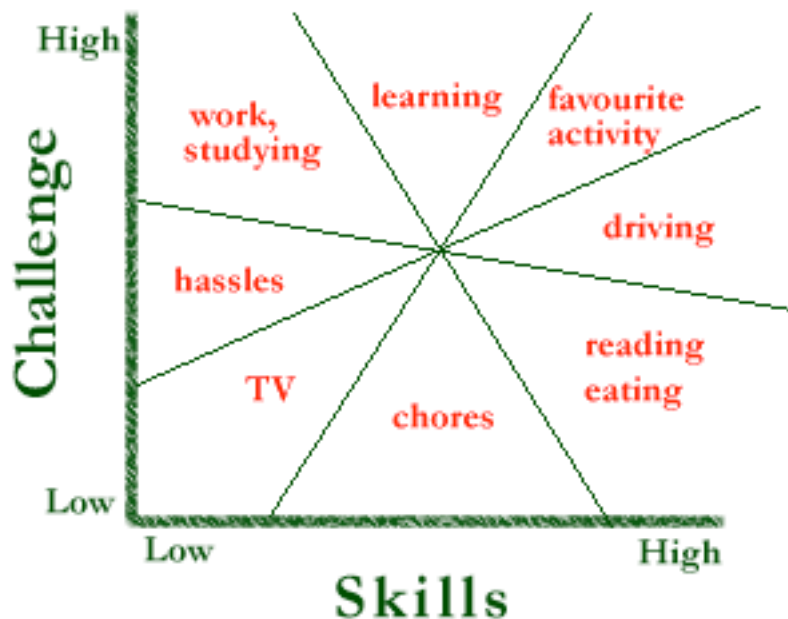


Here Csikszentmihalyi summarized the results of his empirical research in terms of the main feelings reported for the various combinations of skills and challenge in the various activities undertaken.

Can school/work/home life be a flow experience?

Csikszentmihalyi focused particularly on the home life aspect. People don't seem to know how to use their leisure.

With perhaps less certainty in the placement of the different activities, he used the same chart to show the typical placement of "home life" activities:



Why then is it that most people find it "too difficult" to organize themselves towards more satisfying activities, but rather pursue apathetic ones like watching TV?

There is a clear need to overcome the initial resistance to do other than apathetic activities (those that don't need initiating by the person).

This is where the public lecture left us. However there were some interesting points raised in the lecture.

Csikszentmihalyi contrasted enjoyment and pleasure, with the latter used to describe the experience of a hot bath or receiving a massage. He said that the difference was that pleasure lacked a sense of achievement or active contribution to the result.

In one answer, he summarized it as all about having to learn to control our consciousness. This might come from practicing certain disciplines such as arts, sports or religions. Difficulty is often found in trying to apply these disciplines with others, such as with partner or children or workmates!

According to the surveys Csikszentmihalyi has used, 15% of people say they have never experienced the "flow", 15-20% say they experience it every day (or several times a day), with the rest in between.

There is no apparent correlation between intelligence and flow experience - this is reflected more in the different activities that are associated with flow for different people.

Csikszentmihalyi is working with Montessori teachers in North America on applying his model to education for children.

His own personal experience included more "flow" before he published the book - since then his publicity has intruded more on his life.

David Farmer, 18 March 1999